



# Washington State Department of Agriculture News Release

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## **Queso fresco cheese should be purchased from approved sources only**

**OLYMPIA** — Two recent cases of illness related to *E. coli* have been linked to consumption of unapproved queso fresco cheese served at a restaurant in Whatcom County. The situation prompts the Washington State Department of Health and the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) to remind restaurants, stores and residents to only buy Mexican-style soft cheeses, including queso fresco, that are made by WSDA licensed cheese processors.

*E. coli* O157:H7 infection usually causes mild diarrhea with little or no fever. Severe diarrhea, abdominal cramps and bloody stool may also occur. In some people — particularly children under five years of age — the infection can cause a complication called hemolytic uremic syndrome. This is a serious disease in which red blood cells are destroyed and the kidneys fail. Symptoms generally appear three to four days after exposure, but can take as long as nine days to appear. Anyone experiencing symptoms should contact their health care provider.

“Homemade soft cheese is often prepared with raw, unpasteurized milk,” says Washington State Department of Health Food Safety Advisor Janet Anderberg. “There can be several dangerous bacteria in these raw cheeses, any of which could cause life-threatening illness. Infants, children, pregnant women, the elderly and those with weak immune systems are especially at risk.”

*Salmonella*, *Campylobacter* and *Listeria* infections have also been linked to eating raw milk cheeses in Washington. Pasteurization kills the bacteria in raw milk that can cause illness.

To prevent illness, consumers should only buy cheese processed by facilities that are licensed by WSDA. Restaurants and retail stores are required to buy cheeses from WSDA licensed operators. The cheese should always be refrigerated until it is eaten, and should be used by the expiration date stamped on the package.

“WSDA has helped many queso fresco cheese processors become licensed so that they can legally sell their cheese products in Washington,” says WSDA Food Safety Program Manager Claudia Coles. To learn how to become a licensed cheese processor or to verify whether a cheese processor is licensed by the Washington State Department of Agriculture, contact Michelle Lucero at 360-902-1875 or [MLucero@agr.wa.gov](mailto:MLucero@agr.wa.gov).

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